



CONTENT REIGNS

BUT FOR HOW LONG?

For these five brands,
content isn't just a buzzword;
it's a business driver.

By Matt Alderton

When Microsoft CEO Bill Gates famously declared **“CONTENT IS KING”** in a 1996 speech, was he signing its death warrant? Because history is littered with deposed, decapitated and otherwise deceased kings, as soon as you crown someone or something, it becomes **A TARGET FOR KNOCKING OFF THE THRONE.**

Some people seem to think content may be the next regicide. Media consultant Spencer Critchley predicted the death of content marketing in July 2013 in the Huffington Post. In “What’s Next for Content Marketing: No Content,” Critchley wrote, “Although it’s still on the rise, content marketing is already showing signs of becoming the victim of its own success.” Critchley, founder of the digital marketing agency Boots Road Group, felt that “As more and more people try the same thing, it works less and less well.”

Content has become so pervasive, skeptics argue, that consumers might become immune to it. Yet, the data tell a different story.

A Permanent Shift

“How to Build Your Brand with Branded Content,” a 2013 study by Forrester, reports that 70 percent of U.S. online adults trust brand or product recommendations from friends and family, while just 10 percent trust ads on websites.

“For marketers, this signals a need for new ways to build their brands with consumers, as brand-led advertising online and offline has lost its

allure and consumers trust self-selected online content far more than one-way push communications,” Forrester concludes.

The trust deficit won’t likely go away. Neither, therefore, will content. Smart brands have taken note. Almost 35 percent of marketers made content marketing their top focus in 2013, up from 18.9 percent in 2012, according to a 2013 report from content-marketing software company CopyPress.

No doubt, some of these marketers are bandwagoners, chasing buzz. Those positioned for long-term success, however, are brands that have conceded a permanent shift in the way consumers consume. For them, content isn’t a trapping or a trend. It’s a business driver.

“Content marketing isn’t a passing fad,” says Dan Hutson, vice president of communications and marketing for be.group, a nonprofit that operates 34 senior-living communities in California. “People will always have a desire and a need for knowledge. They will always want to turn to trustworthy partners for that knowledge, and that knowledge will always be delivered in a variety of forms as content.”

Here, be.group and four other brands share why content is a king who won’t soon be overthrown.

be.group: Leading the Charge

Dan Hutson
Vice President of Communications & Marketing
be.group



Prior to 2013, be.group’s marketing plan, like so many other companies’, was primarily a push effort—advertising, mailers, directories. But in late 2012, Dan Hutson, vice president of communications and marketing, made the bold decision to turn be.group’s marketing plan on its head. Previously 80 or 90 percent push, the plan going forward, he resolved, would be 80 or 90 percent pull.

“The challenge in the senior-living industry is that, for a variety of reasons, 9 out of 10 seniors have absolutely no interest in moving into a community,” Hutson says. be.group operates 34 senior-living communities in California. “Because it’s such a niche market, it’s very difficult to find those seniors who are interested and amenable to buying our product. You can spend a lot of money reaching out to the whole age- and income-qualified population, or you can build something so the people who have that need can search you out and find you.”

Enter MySilverAge.com, a senior-living website launched in May 2013 to offer content on health, lifestyle, relationships and retirement. More than brand awareness and customer loyalty, the goal is lead generation.

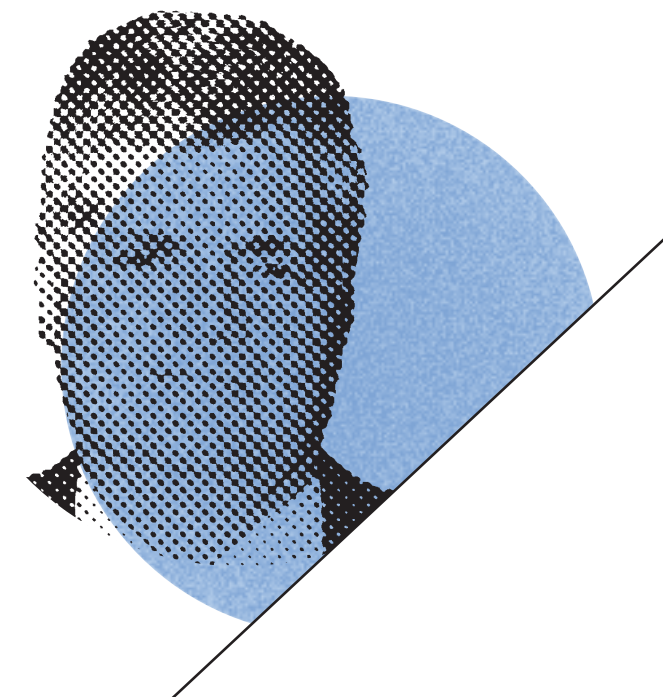
Here’s how it works: MySilverAge.com is built on top of HubSpot, an inbound marketing platform that integrates with be.group’s CRM solution. Seniors and their adult children visit the website to learn not about senior-living communities, but rather about senior-living issues: topics related to health, finance, lifestyle, family. As they browse the site, be.group collects information and scores them based on the content they view and the actions they take, such as downloading a PDF guide, signing up for a newsletter or clicking through to the be.group corporate website. Those who score high are deemed likely sales prospects and receive follow-up communications from be.group’s sales center.

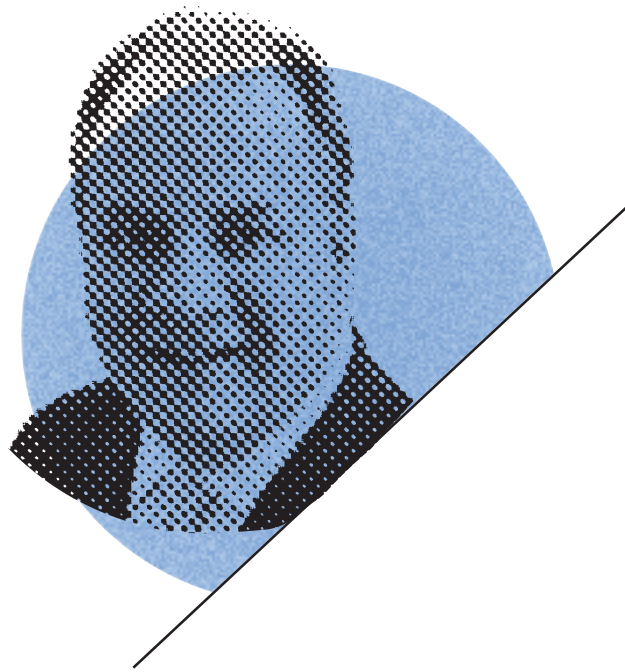
“People come to the site because they’re interested in senior-living issues,” Hutson explains. “From that, we’re creating the right [prospect] pool, and out of that pool we think we’ll generate a higher conversion rate than we would with outbound efforts.”

Long-term, tracking the relationship between what’s read and who buys will help be.group develop a detailed customer profile with which to further target its marketing. “Instead of us trying to figure out who the people are who need our product, they self-select by finding our content and engaging with it,” Hutson concludes. “Instead of finding needles in a haystack, the needles find us.”

“INSTEAD OF US TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHO THE PEOPLE ARE WHO NEED OUR PRODUCT, **THEY SELF-SELECT BY FINDING OUR CONTENT** AND ENGAGING WITH IT. INSTEAD OF FINDING NEEDLES IN A HAYSTACK, THE NEEDLES FIND US.”

Dan Hutson, vice president of communications and marketing for be.group





Sun Life Financial: Right Place, Right Time

Darin Diehl
Assistant Vice President of Digital Communications
Sun Life Financial

If you get money, the financial services industry gets you. If you don't? Well, then, not so much, says Darin Diehl, assistant vice president of digital communications at Toronto-based Sun Life Financial. But rather than turn its



back on individuals who don't get money, Sun Life Financial is using content marketing to make its sales funnel larger, longer and, as a result, fuller.

"The financial services industry can be myopically focused on people that are in

the final solution search," Diehl says. "What content marketing does is push you further up the sales funnel to focus on people who are not yet in a solution search, but are trying to comprehend their own personal challenge or opportunity."

Maybe they're trying to determine how to fund a child's education or how to cope with health care bills. Before they even

know they need a product, they need information. Brands that give the latter eventually can offer the former.

That's why in 2011 Sun Life launched BrighterLife.ca, an education portal for articles about money, health, family, working life and retirement. Diehl describes Sun Life's sales funnel in three parts: acquisition, engagement and conversion. BrighterLife.ca is all about acquisition. "If someone's not yet in a solution search, but they're in an information search, we want to make sure we have something to offer them at that time," he says, "and then give them a breadcrumb trail so they can move along the path to purchase when they're ready."

So far, Sun Life's strategy—letting prospects decide when they're ready to buy, and being there when they do—has yielded promising results: BrighterLife.ca has a click-through rate of nearly 4 percent to Sun Life's corporate website, versus a standard banner ad, which averages a 0.1 percent click-through rate, Diehl says. "The consumer's in charge now," he says. "There's a stage when all they want is to be informed. Do that well and they'll give you trust to move on to the next stage when they're ready."

Renaissance Hotels: Discovering Differentiation

Dan Vinh
Vice President of Global Marketing
Renaissance Hotels

If you've slept in one hotel room—400 square feet with a desk, a bureau and a bed—you've slept in them all. At least, that's what many travelers think. When Marriott International decided to reposition its Renaissance Hotels brand, therefore, it faced a significant challenge: differentiating itself in a cacophony of sameness.

"For a brand that has 155 hotels in 35 countries around the world, we're still very much unknown and misunderstood," says Dan Vinh, vice president of global marketing for Renaissance Hotels. "People don't know Renaissance, or they don't know we're part of the Marriott family. So, we have to find ways to be relevant and drive awareness."

Relevance required reinvention, so in 2009 Marriott began the process of redefining the Renaissance brand. The key to differentiation, it decided, wasn't offering beds; it was offering experiences. "We're going after business travelers who aren't just looking for a functional stay. They actually look forward to traveling because it gives them an opportunity to see the world and explore," Vinh explains. "We've found a really great way to position our brand as the brand that helps you 'Live Life to Discover.' Our mission is to help our guest always go home with a great memory and a great experience."

Content is how Renaissance catalyzes those experiences, which it calls "discoveries." "Content is not just marketing for us; it's part of the brand experience itself," Vinh says.

With that in mind, every Renaissance hotel has a destination expert on staff—what it calls a "Navigator"—who serves as a concierge but also creates local content about unique restaurants, bars, stores, attractions and activities. Each piece of content is a "discovery" that's repurposed in multiple venues, including social media, the brand's in-room magazine and RenHotels.com, which was relaunched in 2012 around destination content instead of room booking.

For more on brand reinvention, see "Transforming from a Burning Platform," page 30.



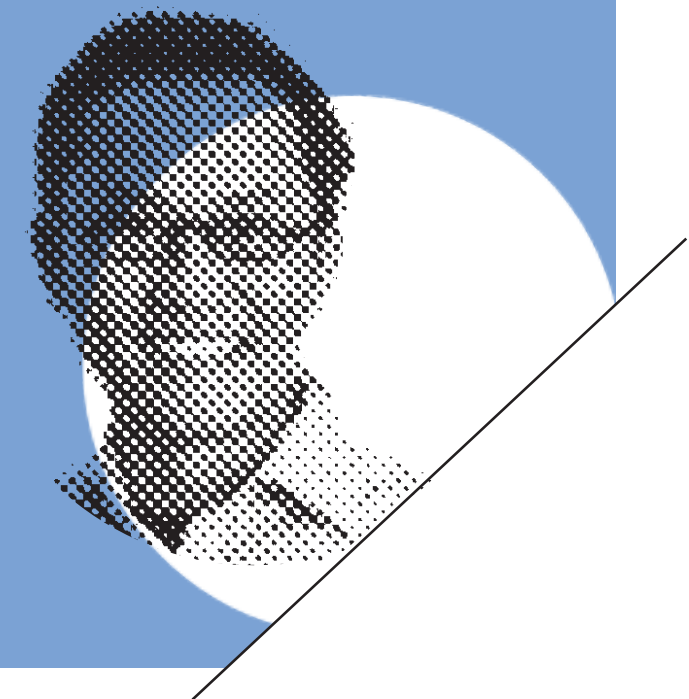
"We already have more than 8,000 discoveries on our website," says Vinh, who also highlights the brand's RLife LIVE program, which complements the brand's digital content with live experiences—art, music, food, etc.—inside Renaissance hotels. "It's about giving people as many different choices as possible and letting them decide what they want to experience. That discovery process is what makes us unique."

"CONTENT IS NOT JUST MARKETING FOR US; IT'S PART OF THE BRAND EXPERIENCE."

Of course, before they can make discoveries at its hotels, consumers must first discover the Renaissance brand. To help them do so, Renaissance in August 2013 launched its Discovery Doors program, which harnesses gamification to incentivize hotel guests to consume and share the brand's content.

Here's how it works: Consumers visit the "Discovery Doors" page on the brand's website, where Renaissance has created a film-based gaming experience that allows visitors to virtually explore a real Renaissance hotel. Inside the hotel are locked doors, behind which are chances to win experiential prizes like complimentary travel or a subscription to the Artisanal Coffee of the Month Club. Unlocking the doors—and, by extension, the prizes—requires collecting "keys" that consumers earn by sharing content from RenHotels.com on Twitter, tweeting their own discoveries using the hashtag #RDiscovery and checking in to a Renaissance hotel, either in person or via Foursquare.

"Awareness with this brand is still relatively low," Vinh explains. "This is a way for us to get people to engage with the discovery part of our brand—including the 8,000 discoveries on our website—and hopefully learn a little bit about us in the process. It's using gamification principles to drive business results."



NYSE: Stories That Sell

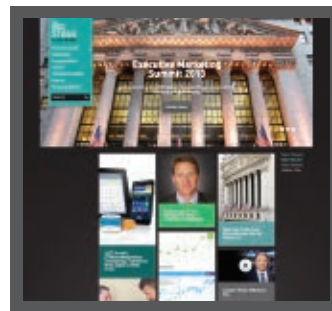
Marisa Ricciardi
Chief Marketing Officer
NYSE Euronext

The New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) is famous for its iconic opening bell. But reaching NYSE's customers—private companies that want to go public—requires more than a sound. It requires content, according to Marisa Ricciardi, chief marketing officer at NYSE's parent company, NYSE Euronext.

"The content we create is beyond brand awareness and brand KPIs," Ricciardi says. "It's very much a business driver."

NYSE started reporting from the exchange floor in the early 1990s and began publishing its own magazine more than a decade ago. In May 2013, however, it evolved its content mission further with NYSEBigStage.com, a digital magazine featuring exclusive content from NYSE-listed companies.

"Our strategy is to share behind-the-scenes access to what we call 'the biggest stage in business,'" Ricciardi says. "We still have the



"WE ATTRIBUTE **A LOT OF OUR WINS** AND A LOT OF **OUR SUCCESS** TO THE COMMUNICATIONS PROGRAMS AND THE VISIBILITY THAT COMPANIES RECEIVE WHEN THEY CHOOSE NYSE TO **DEBUT THEMSELVES INTO THE PUBLIC MARKET.**"

Marisa Ricciardi, Chief Marketing Officer, NYSE Euronext

magazine, but The Big Stage has turned into our primary confluence of storytelling."

Storytelling is more strategic than it sounds. "Everyone understands that NYSE is a valid platform for information. We're allowing companies to leverage our brand's credibility to tell their own business stories," continues Ricciardi, who says the site features stories about companies' histories, milestones and achievements rather than their financial performance. "Going public is a very significant level of accomplishment for a company. It's the story of not only the financials, but of the emotional connection behind an IPO."

Telling their stories with NYSE is a way for public companies to give back to the shareholders, employees and investors who believed in them, and to market their brands to future investors, new shareholders and the public at large. Further, that promise of recognition and exposure helps private companies drum up support in advance of an IPO—which translates directly to the bottom line when they choose NYSE to list their stock.

Case in point: Five years ago, NYSE had single-digit market share for tech IPOs. By mid-2013, its market share was 64 percent.

"We attribute a lot of our wins and a lot of our success to the communications programs and the visibility that companies receive when they choose NYSE to debut themselves into the public market," Ricciardi says. "Driving traffic to [The Big Stage] benefits our brand as well as the brands that are featured on the site."

Uncle Bob's Self Storage: Influencing Purchases

Josh Kruk
Digital Media Manager
Uncle Bob's Self Storage

There's an episode of the Syfy Channel TV show *Mind Control with Derren Brown* in which mentalist Derren Brown invites members of an ad agency to a secret location to make an advertising pitch. They have 20 minutes to develop the pitch upon arrival at their destination. On the way, they're exposed to a series of subliminal messages planted by Brown, who uses them to predict with shocking accuracy what ideas the admen will pitch.

"It's proof of the power of being present, visible and top of mind," says Josh Kruk, digital media manager at Uncle Bob's Self Storage, a chain of more than 450 storage facilities in 25 states. "We don't use any subliminal techniques, but every Facebook post, tweet and pin on Pinterest is a way for people to see our logo and commit it to memory."

Just one in 10 people will use storage in their lifetime. In the same lifetime, the average person moves 11 times. In order to convert a customer, therefore, Uncle Bob's must connect with exactly the right person at exactly the right time.

It's a game of odds, but content stacks them in Uncle Bob's favor, which is why in 2012 the brand launched "The Decluttered Home," a blog offering home storage and organization tips.

"The more your site is clicked and shared, the more likely it is to appear in Google search results," Kruk says. "The majority of people find storage by searching for it online. So the more visible our site is, the better."

Because Google's search algorithms increasingly favor not only relevance, but also reach, digital influencers—people with vast social networks—are key. For Uncle Bob's, those influencers are professional organizers Melissa Michaels and Andi Willis, brand ambassadors who regularly contribute content and leverage their vast social networks to promote it.

"Google values influencers heavily, so our strategy is to have authorities and influencers sharing our content," says Kruk, who cites Facebook engagement—measured by the site's "people talking about this" metric—as proof of the strategy's success. "The industry standard is: If 5 percent of your audience is engaged, that's a good thing. We've been as high as 20 percent on certain days, and on an average day we're 10 to 15 percent. A lot of that is because of the content we've developed for The Decluttered Home and the people who are sharing it."



ETERNAL LIFE

It's true: Every king eventually loses his crown. If not to brutal coup or salacious scandal, then eventually, ultimately, to the inevitable passage of time. Everyone gets old, after all. Even kings.

And yet, if there ever were a sovereign poised for eternal rule, content could be it.

"Some companies might get sick of the buzzword 'content marketing,'" concludes Sun Life Financial's Diehl. "Whatever you want to call it, though, it's about giving consumers the information they want at the precise moment they want it. **The phrase 'content marketing' might be a fad, but the strategy is a trend that will never go away.**" ■